

The Great Muppet Paper

The Muppets have been a staple of pop culture since their premiere in the 1970s. They were created by Jim Henson gradually through the 1950s and '60s until they were refined into the format that is recognized around the world. They all work together creating a variety show, called *The Muppet Show*, which is hosted by Kermit the Frog with a celebrity guest star. Throughout the past few decades, they have starred in movies as well as appeared in live events, such as presenting at The Academy Awards and as guests on talk shows. So the Muppets exist in both fiction and non-fiction works, making them the Schrodinger's cat of pop culture. On *The Muppet Show*, the characters are actors putting on a show, but they also star in movies. The events in the movies are sometimes described to have been fictional and never to have actually happened. *The Muppet Movie* opens with the Muppet characters gathering to watch *The Muppet Movie* itself, whose plot, described to be a dramatization of true events, revolves around the Muppets meeting and traveling to Hollywood and ends with the filming of *The Muppet Movie*. Many Muppets have made appearances on real world television programs, including *The Colbert Report* and *Good Morning America*, to promote various Muppet projects. During these appearances they behave like typical actors making rounds on press tours. To pull things back one final layer, the Muppet characters themselves are depictions by talented actors, the puppeteers who control their movements and provide their voices. Often times Muppets are brought to life by multiple performers over time in the event of retirement or death, and there are many Muppets that must be

operated with three arms and therefore require two individuals to make them act. How do we know who or what Muppets are or on which plane of reality they exist?

Even though the Muppets have been around for 40 years, their characters have the same personalities and traits now as they did in the 70s. Their relationships are diverse and bring up, as well as answer, a lot of philosophical questions. Miss Piggy challenges female character tropes of the 20th century and shows that you should love yourself no matter your size. Kermit, the group's assumed leader, somehow brings together many freethinking artists who are unmotivated and not fond of authority. Together they all work towards the goal of bringing more laughter to the world and Kermit leads them in many unique ways. Gonzo, who has no idea where he came from, often questions his identity. Examining the question of identity through Gonzo only leads to more questions about self-identity and the identity of those who work with the Muppets.

The Beautiful Miss Piggy Third Wave Feminist From a Second Wave World

Miss Piggy is the only main female Muppet, which is no surprise since The Muppet Show premiered in 1976. However, what is a surprise is how much of a feminist she was and still is. She is a fat, feminist, femme role model at a time when politics around body size were practically non-existent. A lot of people tend to not like her character because she can often seem fairly bossy. She is over the top feminine, always wearing heels, fancy hats, pearls, lipstick and often feather boas and loves everything pink. Some women did not connect to Miss Piggy at the time

when they first saw her, but learned to appreciate her values later on. She was (and still is) a showbiz career woman at a time where women's roles in society, especially in the workplace and relationships, were changing fast (think 1980s). She is a beacon of bright, outspoken femininity in a cast of mostly males. She is also the dominant personality in her relationship with Kermit the frog, which can definitely rub some people the wrong way.

What is really interesting about Miss Piggy is that her version of feminism was not around when she premiered. Miss Piggy loves diamonds and her body, which would make her a perfect fit for the third wave feminism of the 21st century, but she had to wait 20 years for that to come around. She was way ahead of her time when it comes to fat politics. The academic field of "fat studies" had yet to be born when she first came onto the stage. The first fat studies conference wasn't held until the early 2000s and now fat studies classes are held across North America. But Miss Piggy came first! She stood out as a role model in fat positivity in an era of enforced female thinness. She was larger than life and no less beautiful for it, and as a child in the '90s that was very important to have. I only wish there was more of it. Miss Piggy is often shown eating a lot of sweets and a lot of food in general, but it is important to note that she was never shamed for that. She is also physically fit and that is often demonstrated in the movies and television series. She performs her signature karate chop on (deserving) characters, showing that you can be fat and still be fit. I understand that this might not reflect much on the philosophy we discussed this semester, but it is important to note the significance of Miss Piggy.

Kermit the Frog An Unlikely and Unique Leader

Imagine a community of individuals who do not share a common geographic history, ancestry or even the same language. They possess a broad range of talent and interests, are very ideologically diverse and have a wide range of individual needs. You can say that they are mostly unresponsive to authority and unmotivated by power and unstructured by any hierarchy. They are the Muppets - a group of diverse, free and artistic individuals. This group represents both the anarchist ideal and the liberal challenge. Since the writings of John Stuart Mill, liberal political theory has tried to find a way to accommodate diverse ideological views while avoiding enforcing a particular way of life. How can we achieve collective goals and avoid hierarchy? How can such a diverse group be motivated without force or illusion? I believe that the Muppets (Kermit the Frog in particular) have answered these questions nicely.

Kermit is clearly the voice of the Muppets, but is he the leader? There was no system that enacted him as leader - no Muppet elections. He also has no real power over any of the Muppets, aside from himself. Anytime he attempts to give a motivating, rousing speech, he almost always fails (which makes space for some jokes from Henson). However, Kermit is the one that the others turn to when deciding what to do and is usually the one who offers solutions to problems. Some would say that the Muppets are more of a group of friends and that Kermit is simply the most liked of them. But that ignores the fact that they are all working together as actors on a variety show. The Muppets all believe in the show and the idea that

laughter is a gift and they want to share that gift with the world. The fact that this group is able to produce many shows without a hierarchy is impressive, and a lot of it is due to Kermit. His position as leader is not because he possesses any special skills, but because his leadership is derived from having a dream and his openness to share that dream with others.

It is important to address how Kermit acquired his leadership. Kermit was born in a swamp in Leland, Mississippi (with approximately 2,353 siblings) and dreamed of being a performer in Hollywood. So in *The Muppet Movie* (1979) he traveled to California and along the way met various Muppet characters with a similar longing and they joined forces. Following a series of setbacks, the Muppets end up stuck on the side of the road in the desert, wondering if they will find a way to make their Hollywood audition the next day. It is here that Kermit has a conversation with his conscience where he blames himself for the situation. However, his conscience reminds him that if he hadn't left the swamp, he would be just as miserable and it is worth pursuing the dream. This shows just how important the dream is; it is the driving force behind Kermit's decisions and brings the group together in the first place. Kermit invited the others to join him in the dream, making the dream bigger than just Kermit.

Another important feature of Kermit's leadership is his reluctance to actually lead. There are many instances throughout the Muppets' filmography where everyone turns to Kermit for solutions and he often ends up blowing up at the others because he cannot take the pressure of making the decisions for them. This happens in *Muppets Take Manhattan* (1984) when Kermit can't secure a venue to

put on their Broadway show, and they're out of money. So the others decide to give Kermit a break by telling him they all found job offers and don't have to worry about how they will survive, but that they are still interested in the show. During their time apart, Kermit is hit by a car and temporarily loses his memory (and falls in with a group of Madison Avenue advertising frogs), and the other Muppets rally to put on the show in his honor, before his memory is restored with a well-placed karate chop from Miss Piggy. In this case, it is interesting to note that Kermit temporarily abdicating from the role, as leader, does not break up the group. When he could not shoulder all the responsibility, some of the others took the reins. This shows a great team when someone who is able to leave a group and it can still function. In this example, it is also made clear that Kermit needs the group just as much as they need him. He needs them in order to be able to believe as much as they need him to, and their action to take other jobs helps Kermit do what he needs to. His absence helped to empower the group to pursue their collective needs. He led without leading.

What is a Gonzo? Muppets and Identity

While all the Muppets are different from the norm, Gonzo has always been extremely different. Most of the main Muppets have a familiar physical identity; Kermit is a frog, Miss Piggy is a pig, Animal is, well, an animal. In the movie *The Great Muppet Caper*, the Muppets are shipped in crates. Kermit's crate is labeled "Frog" while Gonzo's is labeled "Whatever." He is blue, three-fingered, bug-eyed, has a nose shaped like an umbrella handle, and is romantically interested only in

chickens. Gonzo has no idea what he is, and that is the basis for the movie *Muppets From Space*. He wants to know where he came from, and it turns out he came from an alien race! A lot of our identity lies within our origins and our families, and Gonzo was finally able to fill in that piece of the puzzle. But many questions about identity remain unanswered. What makes Gonzo from *Muppets Most Wanted* (2015) the same as Gonzo from *The Muppet Movie* (1979)?

There are two philosophical theories that I want to mention here. First, we will relate with Locke's theory of memory. Gonzo is unique in that he has been around for almost 40 years but not aged one bit. If you are not aging, how does memory theory work? Gonzo has not aged physically, but he has appeared in sequential movies for decades, so he has experienced all those intervening years. Can we then say that he has aged because he has experienced the passing of time? Technically every second that goes by counts as aging, but there are no physiological changes. Because Gonzo's experiences are on paper in script form, does he have a stronger identity because he can relive his memories more truly than we can? This is of course ignoring the fact that he is a character created by Jim Henson. But either way, because he has his memory on films, does he have a stronger sense of self? These are questions that seem to remain forever unanswered.

We can also relate Muppet identities to the paradox of the ship of Theseus. For every episode or movie, dozens of puppets are made for each character and destroyed after production. So the current puppets we see are not the originals – an extreme in the paradox of Theseus. Does every Gonzo puppet have the Gonzo identity? Does the identity lie within the puppet that is being animated by Gonzo's

puppeteer, at a certain point in time? Or perhaps Gonzo's identity lies within the puppeteer himself. Does Gonzo exist in the ether of the collective unconscious that can be accessed by another subsequent performer, as is the case with Kermit after the death of Jim Henson and the ascension to the role of Steve Whitmire? I believe that the identity lies within the ether as well as the puppeteer. However, when the puppeteer dies, that part of the Muppet's identity still lives on in the new puppeteer. It is as if the Muppets have some sort of mythic identity that can be accessed by performers of a certain level.

You can see how puppeteers' identities meld with the Muppets' in the case of Dave Goelz who has been performing Gonzo since Gonzo's debut! Dave Goelz has said that a lot of himself has been reflected into Gonzo's storyline, "When I came to *The Muppet Show*, I found myself suddenly with a different and enormous star every week, and I had absolutely no credentials. I felt so out of place. So that came into the character, and for the first season, he was very self-effacing and he felt like a misfit. Over the years, he sort of evolved along with me... I was an impostor in show business." Many of the puppeteers that work with the Muppets have been assigned to specific characters and worked as those characters from the 1970s until now. How much of the puppeteers own identities involve the characters they play? I am sure that as a performer, Dave Goelz has a hard time drawing a line between his memories and the memories of Gonzo.

The Rainbow Connection

Philosophy is the Rainbow That Connects Henson's Work

There are numerous ways to explore the Muppets philosophically, but these three points are ones that I find to be rather interesting. In addition to the Muppets, the entirety of Jim Henson's work is rich in material with each production connected through its philosophical significance. His film *Labyrinth* explores ideas of overconsumption as well as fairness and justice. *Dark Crystal* delves into the idea of introspection and social consciousness. *Sesame Street* is a wealth of philosophical concepts, ranging from the role of community in personal identity to the importance of cultural diversity. The television series *Fraggle Rock* demonstrates complex social structures and explores the idea of symbiotic societies. Each television program or film that is produced by the Jim Henson Company is full of theories and ideas to make you think and evaluate your own life.